

BENJAMIN LEVIN

PUTTING STUDENTS AT THE CENTRE IN EDUCATION REFORM

ABSTRACT. Education reform cannot succeed and should not proceed without much more direct involvement of students in all its aspects. This paper develops a set of arguments for a sustained and meaningful role for students in defining, shaping, managing and implementing reform, and outlines some ways in which such involvement might occur. The arguments are both organizational and educational in nature, as are the proposed strategies for increasing the student role in the reform and improvement process.

The history of education reform is a history of doing things to other people, supposedly for their own good. Each level in the hierarchy of education believes it knows best what those at lower levels need to do, and has little shyness about telling them or, just as often, forcing them. So governments issue directives to school districts, schools, principals and teachers; districts instruct schools, and principals try to direct teachers.

Right at the bottom of the education status list, of course, are students. They are subject to direction from everyone above. Even though all the participants in education will say that schools exist *for* students, students are still treated almost entirely as the objects of reform.

In this paper I argue that education reform cannot succeed and should not proceed without much more direct involvement of students in all its aspects. I develop grounds for a sustained and meaningful role for students in defining, shaping, managing and implementing reform, and outline some ways in which such involvement might occur. Indeed, greater student involvement would constitute an important reform in its own right.

THE PRAGMATIC AND THE NORMATIVE

I was a student and very involved in the 'student power' movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time when students were asserting – and others were sometimes accepting – the idea that students had a *right* to participate in decisions about their own education. These movements had lasting impacts on universities, where a student presence in governance and student evaluations of teaching have become standard practice. They had much less impact on schools, being reflected more in some of the



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curriculum reforms of the time, such as self-directed courses, than in any of the structural features of schools.

Beginning in about the mid 1970s, we saw a steady retreat from the idea that students had a right to involvement in decision-making, and a steady increase in the view of students as the passive – and often insufficiently thankful – recipients of others' nostrums. In the last few years, even though the dominant rhetoric in education stresses learning outcomes in order to prepare students for economic roles (Levin, 1998b), interest in a greater role for students has renewed. However the grounds for proposing greater student involvement have shifted. In the 1960s and early 1970s, student power was essentially an attempt to extend political participation and hence democracy. The justifications were largely on grounds of rights. The recent literature, on the other hand, although it still includes some appeals to political participation, rests primarily on grounds of efficacy – that reform will be more successful if students are more involved or, even more strongly, that education reform cannot be successful unless students are more involved.

I continue to believe that there are strong normative arguments for greater student involvement but these would require an extensive discussion in their own right (as provided in Levin, 1998a). Fortunately, pragmatic arguments based on efficacy are quite complementary to the normative case, and it is a discussion of these which forms the bulk of this paper.

Consistent with the theme of the argument, the empirical and conceptual basis for thinking about student participation is quite limited. Though the literature on school reform is extensive, very little of it actually takes up issues of the role of students; most of what is available is discussed in this paper.

PRAGMATIC ARGUMENTS

The pragmatic arguments for greater student participation in education reform are varied and overlapping, but the arguments can be thought of as embodying one or more of five lines:

1. Effective implementation of change requires participation by and buy-in from all those involved, students no less than teachers;
2. Students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can make reform efforts more successful and improve their implementation;
3. Students' views can help mobilise staff and parent opinion in favour of meaningful reform;

4. Constructivist learning, which is increasingly important to high standards reforms, requires a more active student role in schooling;
5. Students are the producers of school outcomes, so their involvement is fundamental to all improvement.

The first three of these arguments have grown out of organizational considerations, having to do with ideas about how meaningful change in organisations is created and sustained. These ideas are widely promoted in regard to all kinds of organizations, not only schools. For example, ideas of quality management make similar claims about the importance of participation by all members of an organization. The latter two arguments, however, are unique to education because they have to do with how it is that learning occurs. Although the two lines of argument are treated separately, they are actually closely connected, as should become apparent as the arguments are developed.

Effective implementation of change requires participation by and buy-in from all those involved, students no less than teachers

The idea that participation is a requisite for commitment to change and hence for successful change is now generally regarded as a received truth. Twenty years of work on implementation of change in education has made it abundantly clear that when teachers are not committed to reforms, those reforms do not take root (Fullan, 1991; Elmore, 1995; Cohen, 1995). Almost every prominent writer on the subject assumes that teacher involvement and support is key to any lasting change in schools. For example, in the new *Handbook of Research on Educational Administration*, this theme is taken up in many chapters. Writing about professionalism, Sykes says that “Members of a school community must develop ownership in the local processes through which they evaluate their work and its results in student learning” (1999, p. 244). Smylie and Hart (1999) discuss the importance of building strong social relations among teachers.

Principals in schools with high collaboration and strong professional cultures work actively to create structures, places, and occasions for social relations among teachers to develop and function. (p. 430)

Adams and Kirst, discussing accountability, remind us that “Agents are motivated to change when their personal goals are aligned with change, when they are confident in their ability to change, and when they feel supported in attempting the change” (1999, p. 484).

The list could be extended indefinitely, but the point is clear. The importance of teacher participation is widely accepted, and research has

moved on to consider the forms of participation that are likely to be most beneficial.

Very little of this work gives any attention to student participation. Yet it seems reasonable to think that active understanding and commitment by students to school reform is just as essential. After all, as Fullan (1991, p. 189) points out, “Effective change in schools involves just as much cognitive and behavioral change on the part of students as it does for anyone else.” We know that efforts by teachers to change practice can be resisted, subverted or rejected by students if the latter do not support or understand them (Erickson & Schultz, 1992; Kohn, 1993; Ryan & Stiller, 1991), just as efforts by school administrators can be rejected by teachers. Thus student understanding of and commitment to reform must be taken seriously just as we would want to do for teachers. If participation by those affected by reform is seen as necessary, then participation by students must be accorded the same status.

Students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can improve our approach to implementation

Virtually all school reform is planned and implemented by adults. By talking with and listening to students, we can learn more about how classroom and school processes can be made more powerful, and how improvement can be fostered, whether or not students are committed to a particular reform.

Jean Rudduck and colleagues have produced important work on this point. Based on extensive work with students at a variety of levels, Rudduck et al. argue that efforts in Britain to improve student achievement require educators to

Start by inviting pupils to talk about what makes learning difficult for them, about what diminishes their motivation and engagement, and what makes some give up and settle for a ‘minimum risk, minimum effort’ position – even though they know that doing well matters. (1996, p. 3)

They also make the important point that students’ work in schools cannot be separated from the changes happening in their lives outside the school; that changes in perceived work opportunities or family structures or gender roles have powerful impacts on how students see and respond to what the school provides.

Another interesting perspective on students’ knowledge of school improvement comes from the work of Thorkildsen (1994), who shows how even quite young children have well developed ideas about fairness in the classroom, about appropriate assessment practices, and other important

aspects of school life. However, students are rarely asked to express these views.

More careful listening to students would seem to be a key requirement in order to understand what impact current reforms are having as well as thinking about other changes that might actually improve learning. Yet it is striking how seldom this theme comes up in the school reform literature. Even models that are based extensively on the collection of data to guide improvement tend to treat students as passive providers of information rather than active co-constructors of meaning (e.g. Joyce, Calhoun & Hopkins, 1999). As Fullan (1991, p. 182) puts it, "... we hardly know anything about what students think about educational change because no one ever asks them."

Students' views can help mobilise staff and parent opinion in favour of meaningful reform

For the past few years I have been involved with the Manitoba School Improvement Program (MSIP).¹ MSIP was originally sponsored by the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation as an attempt to learn more about how real and lasting change could be brought about in secondary schools. The program involved school-based change efforts in about 25 middle and secondary schools in the province of Manitoba. Change strategies were developed within each school, with teaching staff playing a key role in determining the agenda and moving the changes forward (Earl & Lee, 1999).

The MSIP has had a strong focus on the use of empirical data in the change process. In each school MSIP consultants helped schools collect baseline and ongoing data on student achievement and retention, as well as on student, staff and parent attitudes to schooling and views of change. One of the important learnings from this process – and one that was rather unexpected – was that data from students had a powerful influence on the willingness of teachers to consider real change. Many teachers were quite able to reject external research as a basis for change, and even to reject the experience of other schools. But when surveys of students in their own school showed significant levels of boredom or disaffection, teachers found this evidence compelling. In one school, the discovery by staff that most of their students did not actually go on to university as they had been assuming created a crisis of purpose and galvanised some substantial and lasting changes in school organisation, curriculum and teaching practice. In other schools the clear evidence that many students were simply not engaged by their schooling led staff to reconsider much of what they had steadfastly maintained was vital to do. Several other examples of the power

of student views in moving reform forward are provided in Nicholls and Thorkildsen (1995).

Corbett and Wilson (1995) argue that student resistance to change can also be a lever for educator learning. When we hear students talk, for example, about memorisation and passing tests as being the essential elements of schooling, we may realise that we have failed to communicate our broader goals and aspirations for schooling, and that change in practices is necessary to do so.

Student data and opinion can also have strong effects on parents. In some schools parents can be an active barrier to change as they fear what they consider to be 'experimentation' on their children. But when their children talk to them about their experience of schooling, and parents really hear, there can be far more openness to considering alternative practices. Coleman (1998) suggests that student-parent discussions about schooling can also be fostered directly by schools, with positive consequences for everyone's understanding.

That we are surprised to learn that students can have an important influence on the debate about change shows the extent to which they have been left out of the decision-making process in schooling. As Erickson and Schultz (1992, p. 482) put it, "The absence of student experience from current educational discourse limits the insight of educators as well as that of students".

Arguments from an educational perspective

Although much current education reform in many countries focuses on basic skills, external accountability, and more controls on what students do (Levin, 1997a), other common elements of reform could be seen as lending support to a greater student role (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998). The emphasis on schooling as preparation for work can certainly be criticised, but it has led to calls for more attention in schools to complex skills such as teamwork and problem-solving (Levin, 1999). The extensive development of sets of proposed outcomes for subject areas such as mathematics and science focuses attention on issues of deep understanding in addition to learning algorithmic procedures. Efforts to develop authentic assessment push schools to look at learning as being more than test scores. The potential does exist for some greater synergy between long-held ideas of educators and the wishes of reformers. As Berryman (1992) puts it,

For the first time in our history, the education needed to function effectively in labor markets in both high- and low-skill jobs looks similar to that needed to participate effectively as citizens, to work through moral dilemmas, or to make intelligent purchases of often complex goods and services . . . The educational challenge common to these disparate activities is to prepare individuals for thoughtful choice and judgement. (1992, p. 345)

Ideas about the nature of better education bear on the role of students in two important ways.

Constructivist learning requires a more active student role in schooling

Much of the recent effort in education reform is organised around constructivist ideas about learning (Prawat & Peterson, 1999). The broad recognition of this position is illustrated in the report of OECD Education ministers in 1996 (OECD, 1996), which described “successful learning and work environments” as being meaningful and motivating for learners; taking into account what learners bring; interweaving knowledge, problem solving and application; fostering active learner involvement, and allowing learners to control their own performance. While constructivism is a broad term that can include a wide range of educational practices, a common thread is the view that schooling must be organised around the reality that students are active constructors of knowledge rather than its passive recipients (APA & McREL, 1993). All versions of constructivism call for students to be engaged more actively in learning.

It seems tautological to conclude that active learning requires a more active student presence in the classroom. Such activism cannot be restricted to those moments defined by teachers. By definition an active student is seeking to manage his or her own learning. The result will necessarily be more questions and opinions by students about the organization of learning. Students will want to have something to say about how they learn, when they learn, where they learn, and so on. Many matters that have traditionally been assumed to be the purview of the teachers will become instead matters to be discussed and negotiated with students – not just because such involvement creates buy-in as in the arguments a few pages earlier, but because this kind of discussion is critical to learning.

A wonderful account of a classroom that embodies a truly interactive approach to working with students can be found in “Education as Adventure: Lessons from the Second Grade” (Nicholls & Hazzard, 1993). The class described in this book, a group of second graders with many facing challenges of poverty, is so vital, and open to student ideas, and so dominated by the importance of real learning, that one cannot but be enthused by what is possible.

The term now being used most often to describe active student involvement in learning is *engagement*. Smith et al. (1998) provide a good review of the literature on engagement and the varying ways in which the term is being used. As Newmann (1992) points out, to enhance achievement one must first learn how to engage students.

Although Newmann takes the view that *engagement* is a broader concept than *motivation*, the substantial literature on motivation (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 1985; Kohn, 1993; McCombs & Whistler, 1997) does provide another important support to the constructivist position. Psychologists can speak with considerable confidence about the features of learning that promote motivation – meaningful tasks, a reasonable degree of autonomy in how these are carried out, and a setting that provides respect, support and challenge simultaneously. Kershner (1996) interviewed year 9 (13–14 year old) students in Britain about what contributed to their working hard.

For many of the pupils, the notion of hard work was closely connected with engagement in an interesting task that presented a challenge to them. The general push amongst these pupils was for more independent and creative ways of working. They spoke with pleasure about work that required them to do their own research, to use their imaginations and to make choices about what to include and what to leave out. (p. 78)

Rudduck et al. (1996, p. 174), studying the factors that students saw as assisting learning, came up with a very similar list – respect, fairness, autonomy, intellectual challenge, social support, and security. Which of us would not want the same conditions governing our own work?

An illustration of the impact of engagement was told to me by a graduate student who was principal of a small elementary school. Part of her responsibility was to teach the grade 4 health curriculum. Influenced by our discussions at the university of the central role of learners in producing learning, she asked her students if they would like to take charge of their learning in this class. The students agreed and immediately reorganised the health classes. In fact, they asked to have multiple copies of the curriculum guide ordered so that they could read them, following which they instructed their teacher on the aspects of the program that they felt would require more of her assistance and those which they felt they could do more independently or in less time.

Constructivism is a key element of many reform proposals that seek to elevate standards of achievement. A further consequence of a constructivist orientation must logically be a role for students in shaping the nature of schooling and hence of reform. To move schools closer to practices that embody constructivist ideas requires a change process that is itself constructivist. Students would need to be active parties in such efforts.

Students are the producers of school outcomes, so their involvement is fundamental to all improvement

In this line of argument, the requirement for student involvement is rooted in the fundamental nature of education, not only in regard to constructivist pedagogy, but for all forms of learning. In general, accounts of schooling

and school reform focus on teaching and the work of teachers. I have suggested elsewhere (Levin, 1993, 1994) that in fact it is learning that is the fundamental element of schooling. Teachers are not the producers of learning; in the end it is students who must do the learning. Students are not raw materials to be shaped, as suggested in so many of the production metaphors for schooling, but inevitably the shapers, for better or worse, of themselves. Of course people shape themselves in a context, so that teachers, among others, can have a powerful impact on what students choose to do. But our interest must finally lie with what students choose, and that means that we should pay much more attention than is presently the case to what learners do and why they do it.

If learning is indeed the centre of schooling, then it also seems evident that learners need to have a greater share in shaping their own production if we are to improve outcomes. A large literature in management now emphasizes the importance in work settings of creating teams and involving workers in decisions about their work. In schools, some of this thinking has been applied to teachers as part of a growing body of work on collegiality (Hargreaves, 1994). However the predominant practice in schools continues to see students as passive.

Studies of hundreds of U S secondary schools (Wilson & Corcoran, 1988) and two large studies of Canadian secondary schools nominated as 'exemplary' or as especially engaging to students (CEA, 1995; Smith et al., 1998) show that traditional patterns of order and hierarchy are overwhelmingly dominant. Many other qualitative or ethnographic studies of schools have had similar findings (e.g. Fullan, 1991; Rudduck et al., 1996). John Goodlad's huge study of U.S. schools in the early 1980s came to these conclusions about secondary schools.

The picture that emerges from the data is one of students increasingly conforming, not assuming an increasingly independent decision-making role in their own education.

On one hand, many teachers verbalise the importance of students increasingly becoming independent learners; on the other, most view themselves as needing to be in control of the decision-making process. (1984, p. 109)

Students in the classes we observed made scarcely any decisions about their learning ... (1984, p. 229)

It is difficult to see how schools can improve in any serious way unless these conditions are addressed directly.

Two other points need to be made before moving on to look at ways in which greater student involvement in reform could be developed.

First, although I have argued that the current discourse about education reform does have some positive potential, it can also provide a significant obstacle to developing a stronger role for students in school improvement, since in almost all the current rhetoric students are, if mentioned at all,

discussed as objects to be worked upon rather than actors to be taken seriously. Ryan and Stiller (1991, p. 117) point out that "...the more we try to measure, control and pressure learning from without, the more we obstruct the tendencies of students to be actively involved and to participate in their own education." Educators generally share this view (though not necessarily in regard to the control and pressure that *they* put on students), but have not done well in persuading governments. If we can connect legitimate concerns about students' learning to the kind of agenda outlined in this paper, it should be possible to mobilise more of the positive potential in current reforms.

A special point must also be made about the importance of engagement and active learning to those students who are least successful in our schools. A considerable body of evidence shows that disadvantaged students tend to receive the least interesting, most passive forms of instruction, and are given the least opportunity to participate actively in their own education (Anderson & Pelliger, 1990; Brown, 1991; Knapp, Shields & Turnbull, 1995). Low levels of engagement are also related to dropping out of school. Yet we also have good evidence that learners who have been least successful can achieve high standards of performance when the appropriate conditions of motivation, challenge and support are present. For example, the province of Manitoba has used a program model that focuses on building motivation and providing appropriate support to graduate from demanding professional programs a large number of students who had been high school dropouts (Alcorn & Levin, in press). Learners with poor success records are often most motivated by forms of education that give them more control over what they do and how they do it (Nicholls & Thorkildsen, 1995). This is one of the main appeals of computer-assisted instruction (Levin, 1997b); as students realise that they can determine what and how they learn, their level of commitment to and success in learning tends to rise significantly.

This latter point provides another connection to the normative arguments for student participation. For many students, and especially those most in need of high quality education, there is no division between the school as a place for meaningful work and the school as a place in which they have a political role (Hunter, in preparation). In the end, learning is strongly linked to a sense of efficacy and belonging, and these in turn imply an active engagement with the organization, nature and forms of learning. When learners and teachers really engage with questions of what should be learned and how, moral questions will inevitably surface. Nicholls and Nolen (1995) point out that teachers do know what motivates students, but do not use these practices all the time because of perceived external

constraints. Lewis (1999) finds that teachers identify a gap between what they think is best practice and what they think is realistic in the classroom. Active engagement in learning will raise issues of what is worth learning and how knowledge should be used. Education which is only technical, only about the curriculum, cannot produce the outcomes we say we really want, whether these are academic or much broader.

DEVELOPING THE LEARNER ROLE IN REFORM

I have tried to show that improving school outcomes is more likely to occur if students are accorded a significant role in all aspects of the process. What steps might we take to bring about such a situation? A rapidly evolving literature on school reform and school improvement generally gives us many indicators of the kinds of approaches that are most likely to be effective. In the case of students, however, the literature is so sparse that we have only some indicators of what might be possible. If and when more work is done with students, we will need to accumulate better evidence to guide our efforts.

Earlier I framed the rationales for student involvement as being either organizational or educational in nature. Practices to build involvement can be thought of using the same two categories. There are organizational vehicles and also educational processes that can contribute to bringing students into the reform process in a substantial and meaningful way. Just as the educational rationales for student involvement are more important than the organizational, so are the educational strategies, but both dimensions need attention.

If we think first of organizational processes, involvement of students in management of change is vital. The most common response might be to include a student on school or district steering committees for improvement projects. Though a step in the right direction, this is too limited an approach. One student is even less likely to represent a diverse student body than a single staff member is for all teachers. Moreover, students will typically have less experience and less skill in the kinds of political processes that school planning groups conduct. Being the only student among many adults is also a difficult situation for many young people.

Schools ought to consider three further steps: involving several students in formal management processes, providing training and support for students, and asking students to organise their own parallel process of discussion of change that could bring many more students into the deliberative process. The first step is simple, the second not particularly difficult. People moving into new roles require help in learning them. Just as

teachers need support to introduce new forms of pedagogy, students will need help in learning to participate effectively in deliberative processes in the schools. Since the skills required to participate in managing reform, such as defining problems, gathering evidence, analysing data, writing proposals, and working effectively in teams, are themselves important educational outcomes, helping students learn them is clearly a worthwhile educational activity that the school should support.

The development of parallel processes for students is another useful strategy. Just as teachers will work together over a period of time to define ideas for change, agree on priorities and consider strategies, so could students. School-wide fora, systems of elected representatives, and surveys of opinions (preceded by debate) on important questions are all means of creating and legitimizing discussion among students on issues that matter. Student councils could be asked, or even expected, to move beyond their traditional role to become actively involved in working on the educational mission of the school.

At the same time, student views should be sought by schools through other means as well. I have already mentioned the impact of survey data from students in the Manitoba School Improvement Program. Many school development approaches emphasise gathering and using data on achievement as a vital part of assessing current status and looking for areas of improvement. Equally important is information on students' views about school. The unique viewpoints of students and their particular ways of understanding and responding to situations are as vital for a school interested in change as are achievement data. The key is to make it normal, even expected, that students would have a reasoned, informed and respected voice in school decisions.

None of these strategies is limited to high school students. As the examples cited earlier suggest, even young students have ideas about what makes schooling satisfying, and the further development of their skills in these areas is itself a valuable educational task.

These steps can be taken in any school with rather modest effort. More ambitious approaches are also possible. Goldman and Newman (1998) describe an extensive and comprehensive programmatic approach to school reform with students playing a central role. They have developed this process working with schools in several U S states, including some very poor schools in Chicago. In their model, students are centrally involved in defining reform needs as well as in implementing them. Special efforts are made to involve a wide range of students in these processes, which include substantial learning for students. In the process, students develop leadership skills and increase their own commitment to school

success while at the same time supporting the achievement of important school-wide goals. The vital element in this model is the move from reform as being *by adults for* students to reform *by* students as well as *by* adults (Smith et al., 1998).

Just as education reform should rest on educational rationales, so must reform strategies have educational as well as managerial components. As Smith et al. (1998, p. 126) point out, "Traditional avenues for student participation in school decisions were necessary but insufficient to create a sense of full participation. . . ." Making reform an educational process means looking for ways in which the day to day work of schooling could engage issues and ideas of reform and improvement.

It is always possible to begin in classrooms by asking students to talk about their views and ideas. What do they see as the issues facing them and the appropriate educational response? What would they like to change if they could? What ideas do they have for making schools more educational? Listening with real attention, asking questions, and asking students to develop their ideas is a way of contributing to the discussion around reform that can be done by any teacher or administrator. Schooling can itself become a part of the curriculum. Students can gather data, conduct surveys, debate options, consider alternatives. The data-based approach to school improvement advocated by Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins (1999) itself provides a large number of possibilities for students to be engaged in school reform. Work by Rudduck et al. (1996), Nicholls and Hazzard (1993), and Nicholls and Thorkildsen (1995) all provide further stimulating examples. Most importantly, all these activities require key educational skills – reading, writing, analysing data, discussing, thinking.

An interesting example of the combining of the work of reform with the work of learning occurred in a school district in Manitoba that asked high school students to undertake research on what happened to former students in their schools (Bryant, Lee & Levin, 1997; Taylor et al., 1999). Students were involved in defining research questions, gathering data, analyzing the data and figuring out the conclusions. They did the research as part of their English course, working with teachers and university researchers. Unlike most school assignments, the results of this research were formally presented to school staffs, parents, and the school board, and became part of the debate in the district around the future of secondary schooling. These projects had the combined effect of meeting important curriculum and learning requirements, contributing useful data to the schools, and drawing students actively into the dialogue around education improvement. Moreover, because students were gathering data from

former students in their own schools, they found themselves thinking a great deal about what their schooling was for and how they could get the most out of it. These students found the comments and advice of their predecessors powerful in a way that the same advice coming from parents and teachers could not be. In a similar approach, Campbell et al. (1994) suggest using students as program evaluators who then make recommendations for change and improvement to teachers and others.

These examples are also reminders of the importance of the student-parent relationship in shaping educational outcomes (Coleman, 1998). Steps that create discussion about school in the home are potentially important in changing the attitudes of both parents and students towards the school. Where students are actively involved in school reform efforts, they should be encouraged and supported in sharing their activities and opinions with their parents and families. The task of parent involvement need not and cannot be done entirely by professionals.

Both organizational and educational processes that draw more people in are also likely to generate more conflict. Once people are asked to participate, they expect their views to be taken seriously. Debate on issues of purposes and values can be difficult and acrimonious. Since schools are not usually places where students' views are accorded much significance, educators may find themselves creating more difficulties, at least until people learn to work together in new ways and to hear different voices. Silva (1999) describes a reform process in a California high school in which students were asked to participate, but ended up even more alienated because they felt that their involvement was token and that the school staff made all the important decisions without regard to students' input. Moreover, Silva points out that even within the student group there were difficulties in creating a process that included all sectors of a very diverse student body. It is tempting to allow the able, articulate, well-connected students to dominate the process, but achieving greater equity in outcomes, as already noted, is only likely when all sectors of the student community feel involved.

The complex problems of creating meaningful dialogue across differences in power and identity (Burbules & Rice, 1991; Fielding, 1998; Halpin, 1999) are beyond the scope of this paper, but vitally important. They are, however, the problems that young people and all the rest of us have to face in our lives beyond the school as we struggle to create societies that are truly open, caring and just. As has often been argued, the skills of political participation, while not part of the standard curriculum, are among the most vital attributes all of us need to learn.

CONCLUSION

As this paper was being written I attended a conference organised by the Manitoba School Improvement Program (MSIP) called “Make a Choice! Raise Your Voice!”. The conference, primarily organised by high school students, was part of the MSIP effort to put issues of ‘student voice’ at the centre of school reform efforts. About 200 students spent the day in sessions talking about ways in which their participation in the life and work of the school, and especially in school improvement, could be strengthened. Listening to students talking about school reminded me forcefully of my own involvement 30 years ago as a leader of a high school students’ organisation. Students’ wishes today are modest, even timid. They do not seek to overthrow the system, or even to control it. They expect and want educators to remain in control. They do, however, want to understand why things are done as they are. They would like to be able to voice their views about change and have them heard. They wish to have some more choice about how and what they learn. On the whole, they are amazingly accepting of the standard organisation and practices of schools.

Thirty years ago we missed the opportunity to use new ideas about students’ rights and roles as a way to build stronger and better schools. The opportunity to do so may now be with us again, even in the midst of rhetoric about schooling that many educators find depressing. Can we find the energy to use the potential of this new moment to support better education?

NOTE

- ¹ More information on MSIP can be found at its website, www.sunvalley.ca/msip.

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Deputy Minister of Education
Province of Manitoba
Winnipeg, MB R3C 0U8
E-mail: blevin@leg.gov.mb.ca